

OUR CONTRIBUTORS.

THE MARTYR CHURCH OF BOHEMIA.

A CRISIS IN ITS RELIGIOUS LIFE.

At present the Presbyterians of Britain are making an effort to raise £5,000 to aid their poor brethren in Bohemia, whose condition, as I pointed out in a letter to *THE PRESBYTERIAN*, on our return from that country last year, is truly desperate. As a few Canadians contributed to the fund recently raised in Britain for the Waldenses, there may also be some who will deem it a privilege to add their mite to the sum to be raised for the Protestants of Bohemia. A few additional sentences to my former letter, therefore, may not be unappropriate in order to state clearly the present position of matters in that country, particularly as regards the question of education, which is the most pressing one.

THE RELIGIOUS HISTORY

of Bohemia, as your readers know, is one of particular interest to all Christians. From the time of its conversion in the ninth century, down to the sixteenth, the Church of that country had maintained a more or less successful struggle against several of the most prominent errors of Rome. As early as 1415, its greatest champion—John Huss—perished at the stake for bearing witness to the truth, his ashes being swept into the Rhone as it leaves the old town of Constance and the following year Jerome of Prague met a similar fate. At that time Bohemia was at the head of European civilization, Prague being the centre of intellectual culture, and its university, of which Huss was the most renowned professor, being attended by twenty thousand students gathered from all countries. The friends of Huss were greatly exasperated at the violation of faith, and of the rights of the people manifested in the odious treatment of this great man by Rome, and flying to arms gained victory after victory under the leadership of John Ziska, over the sovereigns who were acting under the orders of the Pope. In 1433 Rome was obliged to capitulate and to grant concessions to the Hussites, the most important of which was that relating to the use of the cup by the laity, the cup becoming afterwards the emblem of the Bohemian churches in opposition to the crucifix.

In 1457 a free church was constituted under the name of the

UNITED BROTHERS OF BOHEMIA,

the members of which were regarded even by their enemies as the salt of the nation. By them the ground was admirably prepared for the reception and growth of the seed afterwards scattered by the reformers of Germany, France and Switzerland.

In 1575 all the Protestants of Bohemia agreed to the same Confession of Faith, and constituted what was known as the Utraquist Church. Still the Bohemian Brethren preserved a distinct organization up to 1627, their last bishop being Amos Comenius.

In 1620 almost the entire population of Bohemia had parted from Rome. The Bible in the vernacular circulated freely in the country, and Protestant churches, schools and colleges, with a devoted clergy, supported by a loyal nobility and a zealous peasantry, covered the land. Unhappily this state of things was but of brief duration, for that same year the reformers revolted against Ferdinand II., who had extirpated the reformation in Syria and Carinthia, and was preparing to attack Bohemia. On the 8th of November, 1620, took place the battle of the White Mountain, in which the Protestants were completely defeated by the Imperial Army. This was the commencement of what was called the Counter-reformation, and in 1627 a decree was passed, under the inspiration of the priests, that "in the interest of the salvation of souls and that of religious peace," every Protestant in the country must turn Catholic.

By the

CRUEL AND BLOODY PERSECUTION

which followed, the work of centuries was undone by the Jesuits and Ferdinand II. The Protestants were either massacred or driven from the country by hundreds of thousands. Pastors, nobles and citizens perished by scores at the block or stake; bearing testimony to the truth. Churches were razed to the ground, and the profession of Protestantism branded as a crime, so that in 1628 the Emperor boasted that there was not one Protestant church or pastor left in Bohemia. "Never was a people," says a writer,

"seen to fall so rapidly as the Bohemians, from the height of glory and of prosperity, to such an abyss of misery and darkness. With its Protestant emigration, Bohemia lost the elite of its population, the most noble characters, the most enlightened spirits, the best instructed and most creditable artisans. When the Jesuits gained the supremacy, all the ancient national literature from 1414 to 1635, was systematically destroyed being tainted with heresy. Latin was introduced into the higher schools, and instruction became entirely ultramontane. Language, religion, political liberty, and national costume, all perished together. The national spirit seemed to disappear, so that the history of Bohemia might be said to close with 1628."

This state of things lasted for a century and a-half—though the embers remained unquenched, secretly kept alive by the poor in the remote parts of the country. At last, under the prevalence of philosophical ideas, which, during the latter part of the eighteenth century prevailed in almost all parts of Europe, the intolerance of the Jesuits fell into discredit. On the 30th June, 1781, Joseph II. abolished all the decrees of Ferdinand, concerning religion, and placed on the same footing the civil and political rights of his Catholic and non-Catholic subjects. This was followed on the 18th October by the famous

EDICT OF TOLERATION,

which granted the liberty of private worship to Lutherans, Calvinists, and Orthodox Greeks, and allowed the erection of parishes and schools. Great was the joy of the Protestants, eighty thousand of whom now emerged from concealment, and declared that they had been from their infancy attached to the doctrines of the Reformation. In both the Lutheran and Reformed churches, the form of church government adopted was the Presbyterian, and this continues to the present time. Each of these confessions formed a separate consistory, with one president or moderator for both, who was named by the Emperor, and who, up to 1859 was always a Roman Catholic.

At first the ultramontanes were stupefied at the result of the edict, being specially annoyed at the ease with which Romanists could separate themselves from their own church. No longer able to use force the Jesuits now had

RECOURSE TO STRATAGEM,

and towards the end of 1782 obtained a decree which laid down certain preliminary conditions intended to render separation more difficult. Amongst these were special religious instructions of a Roman priest for six weeks, and a certificate from a tribunal that this condition had been complied with. Again the architecture of the Protestant chapels was not to resemble that of Roman churches, neither were they to have bells or towers, nor entrances on prominent streets. From 1781 to 1786 parents who changed their religion, brought with them their children who were still minors. In the latter year it was ordered that in future no child should cease to be a Catholic between the ages of three and eighteen. Promises of marriage between Protestants had to be announced simultaneously in the Protestant chapels and the Roman Catholic churches. In cases of mixed marriages, if the father was a Catholic, all the children were to be brought up in the Roman religion; if he were Protestant, his boys were to be educated in the same faith. After 1842 no Catholic priest would marry a couple of different faith without a written promise from both parties that the children should be brought up as Catholics. Roman *fete* days were to be kept by Protestants, and the Protestant pastors were obliged to announce this from the pulpit. In these, and similar ways, Rome succeeded in rendering futile, one after another, almost all the concessions granted by the Edict of Toleration.

In 1848, under the pressure of political events the Austrian government was compelled to make

GREAT CONCESSIONS

in these matters to the Protestants. A conference of Protestant ecclesiastical authorities was convoked by the government to make proposals as to the relation they wished to exist between the Church and the State. The conference asked to be put on a footing of entire equality with the other denominations, and to possess a complete autonomy. It requested also for each of the two Protestant confessions, a Presbyterian Synodal Constitution. Owing to priestly influence, these propositions were placed in the pigeon-holes of the bureau of the Minister of the Interior, and the conclusion of a concordat on the

part of the government with Rome in 1855, ended for a time all hope of action being taken by the ministry. In 1859, when the two Protestant consistories were united, it was ordered that the president be in future a Protestant.

During the political troubles of 1859-61 with Italy, etc., the government thought it would be good policy to establish

RELIGIOUS LIBERTY

on a wider basis, and in 1861 an Imperial rescript, issued by Francis Joseph, sanctioned this project. By this decree, which regulates present legislation, the Protestants and Greeks were put on the footing of religious equality with the Catholics, and the legal existence of their communities was solemnly recognized.

THE PROTESTANT POPULATION

of Bohemia and Moravia is about 151,000, of whom 106,000 belong to the Evangelical Reformed Church, and 45,000 to the Lutheran. The former possessed in 1868, sixty-eight churches, the members of each being scattered over wide areas. Dispersed thus among the Roman Catholic population, they had many opportunities of spreading the Gospel. In fact, the ordinary services are, to a great extent, evangelistic meetings. At that period they had also ninety-two schools attended by 8,216 children who were receiving a sound scriptural education. In 1868

A NEW SCHOOL LAW

was passed which established a uniform system of board schools throughout the whole country, to be maintained out of the public rates, no account being taken of the existing Protestant schools, which, being denominational, were regarded as private. The board schools, while undenominational in name, are practically dominated by Roman Catholic influences. The teachers are mostly Roman Catholics; the school books are filled with Popish doctrines; the children are taught popish hymns and prayers, and are forced to take part in processions, being flogged for refusing to sign themselves with the cross, while in most of the class rooms are pictures of the Virgin and crucifixes.

SCHOOL LAW OF 1883.

In my letter of last year I referred to the law which had been passed in Vienna, and which greatly aggravates the serious crisis existing in the Protestant Church of Austria. This law abrogates the principle of laics being teachers in primary schools "whose object is the moral and religious instruction of the children," and orders the religious instruction given in the schools to be under the control of "competent ecclesiastical authority." Farther, no teacher is to be appointed "if he is not apt to teach the religion of that denomination to which the majority of the pupils belong," which of course is the Roman Catholic, the Protestants being in the majority in only three or four villages in Moravia. This new legislation, therefore, completely clericalizes the public schools of the Austrian Empire.

THE EFFECT UPON PROTESTANTS

of these laws has been very hard. All remonstrances on their part against them have been in vain. They have consequently not only to help in maintaining the board schools, but have also to choose either to allow their children to be brought up as Roman Catholics, or to keep up, under burdensome conditions, independent schools of their own. This has been found a very trying position; for all who have visited the districts in which they live, represent the Protestants of Bohemia as being extremely poor, scarcely one of them being in good circumstances, and all of them peasants. In 1877 as many as thirty-six out of ninety-two schools previously existing had been closed for want of funds, and the valuable training institution for teachers, at Caslau, was greatly crippled for the same reason. At present the number of schools has fallen to fifty-one which are attended by 4,983 children, while over 5,000 children of parents—members of the Reformed Church—are attending schools saturated with popery. The Romish Church is thus being recruited from the bosom of the Protestant community, from the children receiving their education in popish schools, and this because the parents are too poor to maintain schools of their own in addition to the board schools and other heavy government taxes.

The Protestant school masters have shown a magnanimous spirit of self-sacrifice, and are willing to continue at half the salaries paid to masters in the